

REFLECTIONS

On the uses and abuses of secrecy

Sidney Lens

In the current climate of international crisis, new cries are being heard for intensification of the secrecy that is already far too pervasive in our Government's official conduct. The United States, we are told, has been "too open" in its dealings with the rest of the world. But the secret about official secrecy is that it is rarely designed to keep information from reaching our enemies, real or imagined; its usual purpose is to keep the facts from us.

Recent revelations about Vietnam and Cambodia provide graphic evidence of the sinister aims for which secrecy has been invoked in our recent history. Richard Nixon, you may recall, told the electorate during the 1968 Presidential campaign that he had a "secret plan" to end the war in Vietnam. He couldn't tell us what it was, he said, because that might interfere with President Johnson's diplomatic efforts; we have only one President at a time, so Nixon would have to remain silent. Now, long afterward, Nixon's chief aide, H.R. (Bob) Haldeman, tells us what that secret plan was, and we can see why Nixon *had* to keep it secret: To disclose it would have cost him the election.

Once in office, Nixon set a November 1969 deadline for ending the war by threatening nuclear retribution, and he sent Kissinger to inform the Russians and the Chinese—quietly—what was in store for their Vietnamese allies if they did not come to terms. Fortu-

nately, the plan was never implemented—primarily, according to various sources, because of the massive Moratorium and Mobilization demonstrations against the war in October and November 1969. But the point is that Nixon's "secret plan" was not a secret from the communist states—it couldn't work, in fact, unless they knew about it—but from the American people. And it was kept from them because they would have rejected it.

The Nixon-Kissinger bombing of Cambodia after Lon Nol executed his coup against Prince Norodom Sihanouk was kept secret for the same reason. As William Shawcross shows in his excellent book, *Sideshow*, the bombing violated specific instructions from Congress. The Cambodian people certainly knew they were being bombed, so the secret could not have been directed against them; it was directed against the American people.

It is the militarization of America, and especially the reliance on nuclear weaponry and nuclear power, that has caused the phenomenon of secrecy to assume such massive dimensions.

Through the years, most of the nuclear "secrets" the U.S. Government has withheld were secrets which would not have aided an enemy, but which would have alerted the American people to the dangers of the arms race. Here are a few of those secrets:

¶That the military grossly underestimated the number of people who would die as a result of the Hiroshima bomb. It expected 20,000 to perish; actually 142,000 died. The Government kept much of the Hiroshima material

"classified" until a couple of years ago. On the basis of incomplete data, the United Nations estimated a decade ago that there were 78,000 deaths at Hiroshima. With the newly released information, an international group of scientists put the figure at 142,000.

¶That most of the scientists who worked on the atomic bomb were opposed to using it on Japan.

¶That every member of the scientific advisory committee to the Atomic Energy Commission voted against developing the hydrogen bomb, but Truman went ahead anyway.

Such divisions within the Government have been studiously kept from the American people throughout the postwar era lest they prompt public debate and create doubts that might slow down the pace of the arms race. A stunning recent incident of this kind (see "A \$33 Billion Secret" in *The Progressive*, December 1979) was the suppression of a report by CIA Director Stansfield Turner opposing development of the MX missile. The Carter Administration, like its predecessors, evidently believes that Americans are not entitled to know when a top official has misgivings about an expensive and destabilizing weapon.

Secrecy also serves the Government's need to minimize the horrors of the nuclear age—lest the citizenry repudiate nuclear arms and nuclear power altogether. Early in the Kennedy Administration, for example, when the new President was promoting his fallout shelter program, the Government decided to take the ad-

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vice of a Vanderbilt University psychologist to "supply fewer of the gory details" about nuclear war in order to prevent a "paralysis of anxiety." Kennedy lent his endorsement to a special issue of *Life* magazine which claimed that "97 out of 100 people can be saved" in a nuclear war. This trick was performed with what scientist James Newman called "idiot arithmetic." It left out such gory details as the fact that three-quarters of American homes would be left uninhabitable by a Soviet attack; or that rats are far more immune to radiation than people, and would swiftly spread disease while feeding on cadavers and the filth of a city after an attack; or that bacteria, which are virtually immune to radiation, and insects would wreak havoc on the balance of nature and make human existence impossible. A few AEC scientists admitted these facts to correspondents—on the rare occasions when they were asked—but the Government itself never tried to have the public understand.

In line with its policy of minimizing horrors and dangers, the Government has failed to inform Americans about:

¶The five known occasions (and many more unknown) when misreading of radar almost brought on nuclear war. (These do not include the six-minute computer malfunction last November, a minor incident by comparison.)

¶The seven known instances when the United States came close to initiating limited nuclear war.

¶The hundreds of thousands of people who have died or will die as a result of nuclear testing, uranium mining, and the radiation emitted by 140 million tons of nuclear tailings

We seldom learn about these frightening developments unless a member of Congress, privy to the details, decides to make them public. It was Representative Les Aspin of Wisconsin, for instance, who told us that in 1976 alone the Pentagon had to transfer almost 5,000 personnel who had access to nuclear weapons because their chronic use of drugs and alcohol made them unreliable.

It was only because the Interior Department had to ask Congress for a \$15 million appropriation that we learned

that the Bikini islanders, returned home fifteen years after nuclear tests ended on their homeland, had to be removed again nine years later because "Bikini is still too radioactive" and would remain so for another thirty-five to fifty years.

It was only leaks by "sources with access to the highly classified reports on the Middle East situation" that made us aware of "a secret nuclear showdown between the United States and the Soviet Union" in 1973—a showdown which, like the missile crisis of October 1962, brought us to the brink of world war.

'Secrecy... has become a phobic way of life...'

Innumerable accidents during the transport of nuclear materials, leaks from reactors and waste storage sites, and cancers sustained by uranium miners as well as by soldiers who were involved in the nuclear tests, have been suppressed or limited to minimal disclosure.

Secrecy provides the Government with an opportunity to cover up its own mistakes, embarrassments, and lies. Here are two dispatches from *The Washington Star* and *The Washington Post*, both published last year, which illustrate the point:

"Despite a 1971 law requiring the Pentagon to give accurate results of tests on new weapons," John J. Fialka wrote in *The Star*, "the Department of Defense is continuing to provide inaccurate and sometimes misleadingly optimistic reports that have led to the purchase of billions of dollars worth of flawed weapons systems." The story was based on a General Accounting Office review showing that the Pentagon had suppressed test results showing failure of fifteen major weapons systems.

Walter Pincus reported in *The Post* that "three-quarters of the U.S. Polaris A1 model submarine-launched nuclear

warheads probably would not have worked in the mid-1960s because of a mechanical defect. . . ." Scientists discovered the problem, which they called "truly catastrophic," in 1966, but "publicly, however, there was nothing but praise at the time for the Polaris system."

Another pernicious form of secrecy has been the negotiation of forty-three secret treaties calling for joint military training by U.S. forces of the armies of repressive regimes around the world. These treaties were called "contingency agreements" and kept from public knowledge because various administrations were unwilling to subject them to a two-thirds vote of the Senate, as required by the Constitution. Some of them would certainly have been rejected.

Finally, many official actions are kept secret because they are illegal—plans to kill Fidel Castro or Patrice Lumumba, CIA machinations to overthrow governments (or to keep friendly ones in power), the FBI's COINTELPRO campaign (involving burglaries and other dirty tricks directed at domestic dissidents).

A particularly revealing incident that shows how illegality feeds on itself occurred during preparations for the Bay of Pigs invasion. The Cuban exiles recruited for that attack were being trained at a plantation in Retalhuleu, Guatemala, so that the American people would not know that the U.S. Government was engaged in an operation that violated its own Constitution, the Organization of American States charter, and Article II, Section 4 of the U.N. Charter. While the training was under way, a revolution broke out in the Guatemalan army. The CIA, using its own planes and Cuban exile pilots, thereupon put down the revolt lest overthrow of the Guatemalan government "blow its cover."

Governments, like individuals, may be entitled on rare occasions to keep a few secrets. But secrecy in America has become a phobic way of life, and above all a subversion of democracy. A democratic society can survive a few secrets here and there, but in the long run, secrecy and democracy are incompatible. Where the mystique of secrecy prevails, totalitarianism ultimately triumphs.